

How much power did women possess in Early Modern Europe?

‘Women are created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers. If women grow weary or even die while bearing children, that doesn’t harm anything. Let them bear children to death; they are created for that’.

Martin Luther

‘In the early modern period women were described by male authors as morally, intellectually and physically weaker than men’¹. This conclusion was based principally on biblical teachings and on the medical understanding of the time.

The story of Adam and Eve and the New Testament writings of St.Paul were influential religious arguments for the subordination of women , these were reinforced by Aristotle’s premise that a woman was a physically inferior version of the perfect male form.

Although women were believed by most religious, medical, legal and moral theorists to be inferior to men, they were not viewed as naturally subservient and therefore various restraints had to be imposed upon women in order to sustain the social system.

In the Early Modern period Laws reflected male ideas and worries rather than actual female actions. Law itself changed considerably during this period in a bid to get rid of the highly localized and often contradictory law codes that had grown up in Medieval Europe (and to conform with Roman Laws).. These changes had an impact on the legal status of women.

¹ Women in early modern England- Jacqueline Eales

Marriage was the main reason or excuse for not allowing women to participate in public offices and duties, because it was considered that their primary duty was to obey and serve their husbands and that they would not be capable of doing both. Unmarried women and widows were also excluded because there was a possibility that one day they might get married.

A married woman was legally subject to her husband in all aspects of life. She could not sue, make contracts or go to court for any reason without her husband's approval and in many areas of Europe a woman could not be sued or charged with any civil crime on her own.

In many parts of Europe, all goods or property that a wife brought with her into a marriage as well as all wages she earned during the marriage was the property of her husband. After a husband's death many widows were given a portion of their husband's estate, called a dower that was hers to use until she too died. However, it was not unconditionally hers, if heirs thought she was devaluing the property they could take her to court as the land went back to them after she died.

Along with marriage contracts, states began to produce other small ways for wives to gain some legal and economic independence from their husbands. However, this was not particularly for women's benefit. It was beginning to be understood that a wife's totally dependant legal position often did not fit with economic needs or social realities. In almost all cities, laws beginning in the 14th or 15th centuries, allowed married women who engaged in business on their own, or with their husbands, were allowed to declare themselves unmarried for legal purposes. This meant they could borrow and loan money

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and make contracts without their husbands' approval which was a notable step. It was not all positive though as they could now be imprisoned for debt or for violating civil laws.

Wives were also gradually allowed to have control over some family property, but only if they could prove that their husbands were squandering everything. Such laws were described as protection for women and children but were also to prevent families from needing public charity. So again although this seems like an improvement its motive needs to be questioned, was it to benefit women or the state?

Roman law also gave another reason for women's second class status. It was believed that because of women's 'physical and mental weaknesses', their "fragility, imbecility, irresponsibility, and ignorance" in the words of Justinian's code. A woman would not be allowed to appear before a court because their testimony deemed unreliable. These ideas lead Jurists in many parts of Europe to recommend, and sometimes execute, the re-introduction of gender-based guardianship. This meant that; unmarried women and widows were again given male guardians, and prohibited from making any financial decisions without their approval. This is a clear step back in women's fight for power.

Honour played a role in shaping women's legal rights. For all women, honour was a sexual matter. In most parts of Europe, women of all classes were allowed to bring defamation suits to court for insult to their honour, and it is clear from court records that they did this often. This was a woman's prerogative and so in a sense gave her some power against men. However, middle and upper class women were never seen as able to protect their own honour without the help of men. Male relatives carried out any public

defence of their honour. Male defence of female honour often took the form of laws and customs that might appear to protect women, but again were more to do with male family members' pride.

When we evaluate women's economic role in the early modern period we find that there were not really many fundamental changes. Women were rejected from craft guilds, and were never really allowed to be members anyway. Even when they did participate in the new types of agricultural production they were only paid half of men doing exactly the same jobs. One recent study of the London labour market showed that 72% of women in 1700 were doing full or part-time paid work outside the home. A situation that did not change legally until the nineteenth century. This means they must have played an important part in society, yet their economic position was very low.

The early modern period also saw many requests for the improvement of women's education. For women learning had nothing to do with aspirations for a career or for a higher political position, but rather was viewed to fulfil women and make them better Christians. Formal education however was not introduced for women until after this period, and the restricted education they got did not apply to working class women obviously. Learning was only for women who are "provided with necessities and not oppressed want...who have spare hours from their general and special calling, that is, from the Exercises of Piety and household affairs". Anna Maria van Schurman

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It was thought that a woman's reading and writing may distract her from caring for her household and her children and so was often discouraged.

Even basic literacy was never achieved by the vast majority of women in early modern Europe. Christine de Pizan was the first female author to enter into the renaissance debate about women. Instead of using examples of extraordinary women to argue against women's inferiority, she admits that women are inferior in many things, but that this is men's fault as it comes from their lack of education, economic dependence and subordinate status.

The vast majority of religious and secular writers before 1500 saw women as clearly inferior to men, and presented following generations with countless examples of women's negative qualities. The fact that so highly regarded authorities agreed about 'woman's nature' indicated to most people that they must be right and consequently not many people argued against women's position but rather accepted it unquestionably.

As I have mentioned the story of Adam and Eve was very influential. Eve carried out the first human sin. She disobeyed God and tempted Adam. This is described as the fall of man or the original sin as a result women were viewed as the source of all sin and evil in the world.

Thomas Aquinas created famous classical and Christian ideas about women, stating that women's inferiority was not simply the result of Eve's actions, but was inherent in her original creation. Many of the most important religious leaders of the period were not

consistent, expressing strongly negative opinions of women at some points and very positive ones at other times when it suited them.

Protestants believed that spiritually women and men were equal but in every other respect women were to be subordinate to men. Protestant writers spoke highly of marriage as many of themselves were married. They wrote large numbers of tracts trying to convince men and women to marry. They also advised spouses on how best to run their households and families. It is in this pro-marriage literature that we find the most positive statements about women.

The ideal of mutuality in marriage was not an ideal of equality, however, and protestant marriage manuals, household guides and marriage sermons all stress the importance of husbandly authority and wifely obedience.

The belief that Protestantism had introduced new, positive attitudes towards, women, marriage and sexuality has come under much debate. The medieval Catholic produced much anti-women literature, this was because they were insisting that celibacy was the only way to go and so wanted to portray women in a negative way to make marriage seem unappealing to monks, priests etc.

In contrast the reformed clergy –many of whom as I said, like Luther and Calvin, were married insisted that they held marriage and wives in greater esteem than did their celibate catholic rivals. It was generally accepted that the Reformation had created a new theory of domestic relations in which the position of women was prominent.

The idea that women were more likely to participate in witchcraft had a number of origins in European culture. Women were accepted as having less physical, economic, or political power than men, and so it was likely that they would turn to magic to get what they wanted. Whereas a man could take a woman to court, all a woman could do was, curse or cast spells. Women also were involved in areas of life in which magic might seem the only explanation for unexplainable events.

Some women actually tried to create the image of being a witch. This may seem strange as naturally we would assume that a woman would do all she could to avoid being labelled a witch when in fact it could sometimes protect her.

Neighbours would be less likely to refuse help, and sometimes gifts such as wood and milk would be given to her. She would also be paid fees for her desirable services such as love and protection spells. It also gave her status, a position in her community which would have been coupled with attention, whether bad or good this would have been embraced especially, if the woman was a lonely spinster.

‘Women did not have a formal political role in early modern society. They did not hold office, sit in representative institutions, serve as judges, or in any way participate in formal political institutions, except for a few odd instances in which they served as sextons or church wardens’² which was considered a minor position.

Authors discussing political rights, rarely mentioned women at all, portraying men as all important in society. Whereas women’s rights were subsumed under those of the male heads of their family.

² Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe- M.E.Wiesner

However, some historians believe that women had a different type of political power, informal political power. There is a difference between power and authority, and while women didn't have power which was formally recognised, they did have authority. They were able in a sense to shape political events.

'Through...marriage...letters...rumours...they shaped networks of opinion...they hindered or helped men's political careers; through giving advice and founding institutions they shaped policy; through participation in riots...demonstrated weakness of male authority structures'³.

In early modern England male dominance was reinforced through the political theory of patriarchy in which the role of men as heads of the households was believed to be corresponding to the role of the monarch.

The extent and influence of patriarchal control has been under debate and two influential narratives about the status of women have emerged.

The first argues that the educational and spiritual status of women was elevated in the 16th and 17th centuries by the outcome of both the renaissance and the reformation. This analysis was centred on humanist demands for improved female education as well as the Protestant emphasis on the important role played by women in promoting godliness in the home.

The second narrative is a story of decline which states that the growth of capitalism and the industrial revolution had a damaging effect on the economic status of women. This examination was founded on the belief that for much of the Early Modern Period the production of goods and foodstuffs was largely centred on the home where women had some amount of power. By 1700 the growth of larger scale production, the accumulation

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of capital and the growth of the wage economy were beginning to wear down the economic independence of women.

The first serious attempt to investigate the lives of early modern women as a social group was made by Alice Clark. She argued that the seventeenth century represented ‘an important crisis in the historic development of Englishwomen’⁴ as economic production was separated from the household. Women were continuously forced into more restricted household roles and their ability as wage earners fell as they were unable to contend with skilled male workers (due to industrial revolution).

‘There was not a progressive, linear decline in the economic importance of women, but rather there was considerable variation in the experiences of different groups of workers and social classes’⁵. In addition, changes in the organisation of the market economy increased the independence and wage-earning capacity of women in certain occupations.

In the beginning of the 16th Century a debate arose about female rulers, which included women who advised child kings as well as women who ruled in their own right. The question that lay centre to the debate was this, could a woman who was born into a royal family and educated, overcome the limitations of her sex? Which was more important Character or Gender? Examples used in this debate were women such as Mary and Elizabeth Tudor in England, Mary Stuart in Scotland, Catherine de Medici and Anne of Austria in France.

⁴ Working life of a seventeenth century woman – Alice Clark

⁵ Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe – M.E. Wiesner

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The most extreme opponents of female rulers were Protestants during the reign of Mary Tudor. This contradicts with the viewpoint that Protestants held women in higher esteem or improved somewhat their position in society. These opponents were exiled and from the safety of their distance wrote that 'female rule was unnatural, unlawful, and contrary to Scripture'.

We can see clearly from the example of Elizabeth that a Queen might be female in her body yet have the masculine qualities regarded as necessary to rule. Elizabeth used her femininity to her advantage, 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of King'.

After looking at this period and attitudes towards women I would say that in order to survive or progress in this society women had to be like Queen Elizabeth and be manipulative and use their femininity to their advantage. At this time when in the home men were God, women would have to use men to have any political voice. As I have mentioned through networking women did have some political power, through the creation of witchcraft they did have some power in their communities, and through the day to day running of the household they also had some economic power.

However, obviously their power was limited in all of these aspects and cannot be compared to the quantity of power held by men. Through lack of education and opportunities women were never going to excel in Early Modern Europe.

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